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Research Panel: Sexual Violence and Human Trafficking

Presenter: Samantha Majic, PhD. Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, John Jay College-CUNY

Title: Lights, Camera, Policy? Examining celebrity-driven anti-sex trafficking campaigns

Abstract: Celebrities—persons who attract large audiences and are well known in the realm of popular culture (sports, entertainment, and fashion)—are increasingly vocal about sex trafficking. Although they often lack knowledge about or experience with the issue, they commonly testify before Congress, serve as Goodwill Ambassadors for the UN, and act in public service announcements (PSA), to name just some examples. As a result, celebrities arguably play a role in shaping related policy developments, namely by fostering particular discourses about the issue.

To explore celebrities' engagement with sex trafficking, my paper considers a very prominent case: Demi Moore's and Ashton Kutcher's "Real Men Don't Buy Girls" video campaign, and their subsequent partnership with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to create a human trafficking PSA. The former was meant to deter men from soliciting sex, while the latter was meant to educate the US public about sexual and labor slavery more broadly. Supporters of these efforts claimed that they represent an innovative and effective way to promote gender equality by educating the public to "end demand" for prostitution and sex trafficking.

This paper takes a more critical view of these celebrity-government efforts. Using interpretive methods, and drawing from a growing body of research about celebrities in politics, my goal is to analyze Kutcher's and Moore's case to understand whether their discourse promotes or inhibits gender-equal understandings of prostitution, sex trafficking, and related policy responses. I argue that instead of emphasizing the complexity of sex trafficking, their efforts promote a unitary narrative about the issue that reifies stereotypical notions of gender, agency, and (in)equality. The remainder of this paper discusses the broader lessons we may learn from this case about celebrities, prostitution policy discourse, and social change.

Keywords: Celebrities; politics; sex trafficking; public awareness

Biography: Samantha Majic is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at John Jay College-CUNY. Her research lies in gender and American politics, with specific interests in sex work, civic engagement, institutionalism, and norms. She is the author of *Sex Work Politics: From Protest to Service Provision* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), and the co-editor (with Carisa Showden) of *Negotiating Sex Work: Unintended Consequences of Policy and Activism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014). Her research has also appeared/is forthcoming in *Perspectives on Politics, Polity, New Political Science, The Journal of Women, Politics & Policy, Gender and Society*, and *Critical Policy Studies*. A Fellow of the American Association of University Women, Dr. Majic is also a member of the *Perspectives on Politics* editorial board.